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CHOU EN-LAI AND THE OPENING TO THE WEST

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The People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1970 was a nation nearly alone in the world. After its ideological break with the Soviet Union in the early 1960's, the PRC developed its own foreign policies along radical lines, verbally attacking the Soviet Union and supporting revolution in the Third World using its own military experience as a model. Though the PRC's influence initially increased, it then decreased as the revolutionary movements it fostered failed. The Great Cultural Revolution from 1966 through 1968 directed PRC energies and attention inward -- domestic turmoil reigned. More foreign governments and revolutionary movements which the PRC had supported were estranged. In the end, the voices of moderation began to be heard, and the reformation of the basic party and state structures began. Disagreements developed among PRC leaders as to which of the pre-Cultural Revolution policies, including foreign policy, ought to be resurrected. This was the canvas upon which Cho En-Lai undertook to create his grand strategy.

How did Chou see the world in his "mind's eye?" First, his eye was that of a geopolitical realist. He saw nation-states as actors. He saw a multipolar, not a bipolar world. He concurred with the Nixon view that in the early 1970's a new world order was emerging consisting of five centers of power - the US, USSR, Western Europe, Japan, and the PRC. This analysis was generally consistent with the more frequently mentioned Chinese model which divided the world into Superpowers (U.S. and

U.S.S.R.), the Second Intermediate Zone (Western Europe and Japan) and the Third World (presumably under Chinese leadership).

Chou saw that the situation at hand involved the PRC's national interests and substantial threats to them. Its primary interests were in basic security. Defense of the country in the face of over a million Soviet troops massed along China's northern border was clearly a vital national interest. The sour relations with the Soviets, the numerous border clashes that had occurred over the past several years, the precedent of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia -- and the announcement of the principle of "limited sovereignty" or Brezhnev Doctrine -- made the threat of a preemptive strike by the Soviets with the possible use of nuclear weapons seem all the more credible.

Chou also saw a related vital interest in establishing and maintaining a favorable world order, that is, a balance of power conducive to a Chinese sense of well being and security. In this area, the overwhelming threat was an expansionist Soviet foreign policy -- so called "social imperialism" which could overpower a China alone in the world. Soviet involvement in Vietnam, in Egypt, and in Cuba, as well as along the PRC border were all evidence of its quest for global hegemony. Soviet designs in India were evident. Chou saw the Soviets building a string of alliances around the PRC in an effort to contain and isolate her.

Other threats to equilibrium which China perceived were the possibility of Japanese rearmament and militaristic nationalism and collusion between the Superpowers against Chinese interests. U.S. inaction after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968

was seen as an example of Superpower collusion. Of course, in view of the state of relations or lack of them between the PRC and the Superpowers, the possibility of war with both of them (the ultimate "collusion") could not be dismissed. Further, as American influence waned in the Pacific, more opportunities for the Soviets might appear which would shift the balance. The Vietnamese situation, in particular, was of concern.

Chou also must have seen that the economic national interests of China could be furthered by breaking out of isolationism. The economically backward society could profit by access to the more advanced technologies of the developed world. He would also have identified at most a major interest in the exportation of Chinese ideological values to other countries, though this was not nearly so important to Chou, the realist, as was international equilibrium. Finally, the reunification of Chinese territory -- resolution of the Taiwan issue -- was a major national interest because it involved the legitimacy of the PRC and resolution of the issue of leadership of the Chinese people.

Although Chou must have observed that the the world situation afforded him several unique opportunities, his constraints at home were severe. U.S. international influence was waning. Divisions within the Western Bloc were forming over the future course of the seemingly endless Vietnam war. Similarly, the Soviets faced their own political difficulties in the wake of the Czech invasion. The opportunity to drive a wedge between the superpowers to forestall any "collusive" tendencies

presented itself. The international signals sent by the US indicated a Western readiness to talk. The U.S. was obviously looking for options in Vietnam. The PRC was a major unknown in the calculations as to how to "liquidate" that situation. PRC involvement would benefit the U.S. in dealing both with Ho Chi Minh and the Soviets. The U.S. also obviously shared the PRC's interest in curbing the Soviet hegemonic tendencies. In short, the world situation made the PRC particularly useful to the U.S. at this moment in time.

The domestic political situation in the PRC was a powerful constraint. The chronically unstable internal political situation denied Chou any opportunity to forge a domestic consensus on what foreign policy ought to be. The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution precluded national policy formation. Strong support existed for the continuation of previous hard line foreign policies: the U.S. had been denounced as an imperialist archenemy for some 25 years; from the late 1950's to 1964 relations with the Soviet Union soured, resulting in its since being particularly strongly denounced as a "social-imperialist."

Although changes in approach were taking place as a result of the excesses and failures of years past, the legacy of those years and its impact on the Chinese people remained. Thus, both the US and Soviets remained ideological enemies of "the people". Because the U.S. had been presented as the absolute antithesis of all the PRC stood for under Mao, any options which involved the U.S. would likely be domestically sensitive and potentially

destabilizing to an already unstable society. They would certainly have to be reconciled with the ideology which the Chinese people had been "sold" and had lived with for years. Any PRC concessions would be criticized by both the Soviets and their sympathizers as a subversion of the international communist movement and capitulation to the enemy.

The Soviets also greatly complicated the domestic situation in another way. The divergent paths of Soviet and Chinese Communism, the continued bleak relations of the PRC with the Soviets, and the obvious threat posed by the presence of the powerful enemy on the northern border resulted in continued internal pressure from factions which believed that a reduction in tensions through accommodation with the Soviets would be more appropriate than the continuing mutual verbal assaults which were a fixture in PRC operation. Indeed, such factions were perilously close to holding the upper hand. Further instability or hardening of relations with the Soviets could spell internal disaster because of the fear of the immediate physical threat.

How did Chou assess Chinese power? He clearly recognized that it was limited. While he had the most powerful military forces in Asia, they were no match for the Soviets, being defensive in nature and lacking any nuclear delivery capability which would threaten Moscow. While China's huge population and considerable resources made it a potential economic giant, its economic and technological backwardness and its virtually continual political turmoil prevented full mobilization of that potential. Chou well appreciated the psychological dimensions of

power. For all its shortcomings, if China could demonstrate its prestige and importance to the world, its potential would allow it to again align itself with and likely assume a leadership role in the the Third World. It would thus acquire more power by virtue of that relationship. The particular leverage that the PRC held vis-a-vis the U.S. both with regard to the Soviets and the Vietnam issue provided an opportunity to demonstrate that importance.

Chou's primary foreign policy objective was to create a balance of power favorable to the PRC by resisting the expansion of influence of the Soviet Union, the primary threat to equilibrium and, secondarily, any similar aspirations by others. The primary objective included actions in preparation for defense against any Soviet attack on China. A secondary objective was to isolate and divide the Superpowers so that their influence in the Third World and their ability to collude with each other to China's detriment would both be minimized. A third objective was for the PRC to reassert itself in a leadership role in the Third World. Finally, Chou wanted to reunite mainland China and Taiwan under the PRC banner, but he observed that this was a very long term issue.

The grand strategy of Chou En-Lai was, as is well known, built around rapproachment with the West, and the US in particular. The PRC would open the channels, but, since the US was still an ideological archenemy, the PRC could not appear to "sell out" by compromising its principles. The strategy relied on the fact of meeting, of mutually understanding the other's

perceptions and directions, and of normalizing relations, rather than agreeing on specific undertakings. The normalization of relations would introduce a new element of uncertainty in the Soviets' calculations and restraint in their actions. Making positions of the parties mutually known would provide some assurance that the U.S. and Soviets would not jointly oppose the PRC. Relations with the U.S. would open the door to normalization of relations with the rest of the Western Bloc and create inroads into the Second Intermediate Zone. They would pave the way for PRC entry into the United Nations, a forum which would provide the PRC legitimacy and would facilitate the PRC's efforts to align itself with the Third World nations at the expense of the Soviets, thus undermining their influence. The result would be enhanced PRC prestige and effectiveness, diminished Soviet influence, and political isolation of Taiwan.

Since the normalization of relations could not be allowed to visibly compromise PRC public positions, it was a matter of importance that the Chinese allegiance to its guiding communist principles be reaffirmed and highlighted for domestic consumption so as to accommodate the ideological difficulties inherent in rapprochement with the enemy. It was also important that the ideological rhetoric remain strong so that the public perception of the imperialist threat would remain tangible, resulting in continued support for the rapid military buildup the PRC was undergoing. This would meet the Soviet border challenge and the broader balance of power concerns. Characterization of issues such as "Superpowers versus Third World," inherent in the

rhetoric, would also give the PRC legitimacy as a de facto Third World spokesman.

The tool of statecraft which Chou used, nearly exclusively, was diplomacy. Channels were quietly opened and the China Summit took place. The parties understood each other's general philosophies and intentions. Specific commitments were avoided. The Chinese introduced uncertainty into Soviet expansionist calculations. They received U.S. assurances that it had no territorial aspirations and would remain in the Pacific to balance the Soviets for years to come. The Shanghai Communique provided the Chinese the means to publicly state their differences with the U.S. on major issues, thus demonstrating to their own people and the world they had not "sold out." They also obtained U.S. recognition that the Taiwan issue was an internal matter and a commitment that the U.S. troops would be withdrawn in the future, paved the way for PRC entry to the United Nations and the expulsion of the Taiwan government of Chang Kai Shek, and set themselves up as a Third World spokesman -- all in one summit in which they gave no ideological ground.

Chou then set about to normalize relations with other Western Bloc countries. Assurances against rearmament were obtained from Japan. The PRC was seated in the United Nations, and Taiwan was expelled. Ties with the West opened up opportunities for modernization and economic advancement. But most important, the channels through which the PRC could influence future U.S. actions were also opened. Those channels

were used, among other things, to urge the U.S. to keep its commitments and maintain the balance.

Chou largely fulfilled his objectives. The balance shifted against the Soviets, although instability resulting from the Soviet - Indian Friendship Treaty caused concern in the short term. While the solution to the Taiwan issue remains for the future, the process has begun.

Chou's actions were masterful -- the result of his recognition of an extraordinary opportunity on the one hand and his ability to work within severe constraints on the other by balancing the contradictory requirements of reality and ideology in the unstable international and domestic arenas. The high risk - high reward strategy of rapprochement with the West was a well conceived plan by a remarkable man and has paid handsome dividends for the People's Republic of China.